
ONE LITTLE STRAWBERRY AND HOW IT SPREAD

BY COOKIE ROSCOE HANDFORD



Photo by Laura Berman

When my kids were little, I started reading labels for the first time and discovered way too many syllables in what was going into my babies' pristine little stomachs. Why is there monosodium glutamate in soup? Should sugar be the first ingredient in everything kids eat? I was stunned at the amount of food that I began to throw out, amazed at what I'd been so casually eating, and horrified at the suddenly tiny list of foods that I felt safe with.

I developed a sense of dysphoria while shopping. Walking the wide, beautifully lit aisles crammed with lush displays taller than me, surrounded by choice upon choice, I kept thinking to myself, "There is nothing here to eat!" If I softened my vision and relaxed my grip a little, there was really nothing wrong with buying frozen fish sticks, was there? Everyone needs protein, and they're so easy... This, of course, around the time the news was full of stories about fish stocks collapsing. But the banshee's wail of desperation that all the news stories inspired became so muted here in the store – reduced to a buzz like a faulty light fixture way up in the ceiling somewhere, with not a hint of panic in the brightly coloured boxes and that paternally smiling sea captain – that I

needed to find some sanity. My kids started watching, puzzled, while other kids peeled fruity rollups from the mile of plastic they come packaged in, but which I no longer bought for them. The hours I spent explaining made no difference; they felt deprived.

Then, one afternoon, my neighbour innocently offered me a strawberry. Mitch came out of his house carrying a plate with a few smallish berries and said, "Try one of these, they're organic." At the time I believed "organic" was simply one more label, and that adding more costs to food wasn't going to solve my problems. Mitch raved, though, and so I politely tried one.. And, lo! It was a *strawberry!*

I guess I'd come to think that, as I aged, things no longer tasted the way they did when I was a kid. This strawberry, however, made my eyes water and my back teeth sting, it was so delicious. I went home and signed up for a Good Food Box from FoodShare, the place that had supplied Mitch. The Good Food Box enabled me to get a laundry hamper full of tasty vegetables every other week that had to be cooked or

Above: Cookie Roscoe Handford ringing the closing bell at the Green Barn Farmers' Market

thrown out. Once I got used to simply cooking them or, even more simply, just eating them, we were on our way. One of my children is a picky eater, but with fewer choices around, she discovered that her hard-wired preferences weren't alleviating her hunger pangs. Left in plain view with no fruity rollups around, vegetables had a way of disappearing down the hatch. As a bonus, I found I no longer had to read labels.

Soon I began to search out affordable protein that would eliminate the guilt that echoed through me when I read about animals and the horrible ways we turn them into our food. I found a pressure cooker on the internet and a woman who drove across town to sell it to me, then stayed to show me how to use it. With my new-found skills I could go from twenty cents' worth of dried beans and rice to a complete dinner for four in less time than it takes to get into the car, find a drive-through, pay \$25, and re-park the car.

I'm the cook in my family because I'm the one who feels passionate about food. My husband would be happy with pizza every night. In search of naturally raised and organic meats, I became a member of Karma Co-op, and then I started buying meat directly from Beretta Farms. Eventually I began to buy meat from the Dufferin Grove Organic Farmers' Market, where I met the growers of the vegetables and the protein, and learned so much, especially about how stressed out our food systems are, with particular attention to the farmers themselves. I met farmers who have worked their fields at night by headlight and farmers who spend as much time doing paperwork to prove they grow organically as they spend growing organically. When I began to look for farmers who would come to another market if I opened one, I found many, many farmers who were ten years past being interested in anything but retiring.

Throughout this long journey out of the grocery store, I'd been volunteering with The Stop and Artscape to help build the vision of the Wychwood Car Barns project. The Stop is a not-for-profit organization that works to increase food access, and Artscape is a non-profit that strives to retain living and working space for artists. The Stop was also thinking that having a farmers' market at Wychwood would make sense. We put our ideas together, and I found myself becoming the manager of the market.

Thus began an earnest search for farmers. Late in 2006, Harry Stoddart agreed to be a farmer at my market. This is the moment in an opera when the lead song breaks out. I felt like Maria Von Trapp on that mountainside, swirling and singing with my mouth really wide open. Harry had mulled it over really well, and finally agreed to give marketing another try after having no success with it ten years earlier.

The Stop sagely chose to have a pilot run of the market in the late summer of 2007. Becoming a market manager gave me almost as many anxious dreams as becoming a mother. In fact, as opening day approached I was haunted by dreams that I'd put the market in the wrong place and no one could find it, or put it where it should be but no one came...

As it turned out, the market's been a huge success, which I chalk up to a great roster of vendors and huge support from the community. And

the transformation of the market now that it's in its permanent location at the Green Barn is a dream come true.

As for my own transformation, which began around the time I tasted that little Ontario-grown organic strawberry, well, I rarely step into a conventional grocery store anymore, and never without feeling a little sad for the whole business. My kids happily munch apples and cheese curds as they help out at the market, and instead of sending them to summer camp we go to farms to work and learn and feel so blessed. That banshee's wail that kept telling me that the way I was eating was killing the Earth (or someone on it) is now quiet. As long as I'm doing all I can to honestly respect food and the people who provide it, my conscience and I are fine. □

The Green Barn Farmers' Market is located at 601 Christie St. (for the market's schedule, see page 55).

Cookie Roscoe Handford is a voiceover performer in Toronto as well as a community food activist. She is the manager of the Green Barn Farmers' Market.

